

HISTORY OF JEWS SERIES – PROPHECY

“The Wandering Jew” (Psalm 137:5-6)

After the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–136 AD), Judaism changed radically. Without a temple and a national homeland, it faced the great danger of assimilation and eventual extermination. This was because the Diaspora Jews that existed outside of Israel were generally more liberal and outward-minded. The fact that Judaism survived and is flourishing today is one of the greatest miracles in the history of this world.

The Jews did not forget Jerusalem and the Promised Land. There has been an almost continual Jewish presence in Jerusalem for the last 3,300 years. Among the Diaspora Jews there are constant reminders of their lost homeland. Every orthodox Jewish wedding has a point when the groom will break a glass and vow,

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy. (Psa. 137:5-6)

So in the midst of the joy of a wedding union, all are publicly reminded never to forget the sorrow of the loss of the Holy City and the temple.

JEWISH POPULATION DISPERSION

At the end of first century, the Jews reportedly made up one in ten of the Roman Empire. The majority of those lived outside the land of Israel. Oskar Skarsaune estimates that roughly 2.5 million Jews lived in the land of Israel, and 5 million Jews lived in the Diaspora communities before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. After the three Jewish-Roman wars, the overall total of worldwide Jews was greatly reduced. For instance, Dio Cassius claims that 580,000 men were killed in the Bar Kokhba revolt alone.

The majority of those in the land of Israel were killed, exiled or enslaved by the Emperor Hadrian. He had renamed Jerusalem as *Aelia Capitolina* and Israel as *Syria Palaestina*. He effectively banned the Jews from settling in the land of Israel. Hadrian sought to ensure that no Jewish temple, Jerusalem or state ever rose again. They were only permitted to enter only on the 9th of Av to mourn losses in the revolt. Those that were not killed or enslaved fled to all the corners of the Empire. This fulfilled many of the OT prophecies,

And the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, even wood and stone. And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the LORD shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: And thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life. (Deut. 28:64-66; cf. Lev. 26:33)

Many joined the settled Diaspora communities that had settled during the Babylonian exile and had never returned. Others joined the Diaspora communities in the West that had

settled in trading centres like the cities around the Mediterranean such as Alexandria as well as more inward in places like Turkey, Greece, and Rome. The Apostle Paul had grown up in Tarsus (modern Turkey) as a Roman citizen. The Roman Historian, Strabo observed,

“This people has already made its way to every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation and in which it has not made its power felt.” [Josephus, Antiquities, 14.115]

This dispersion intensified down the centuries due to economic migration, discrimination, expulsion, and persecution. The Jews became known as “the wandering Jew.” Christendom (or so-called Christian Europe) was not generally a welcoming place for the wandering Jews. The Jews became increasingly marginalized down the centuries. After Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century the Jews faced greater disadvantages. A poll tax was levied on them until the reign of Emperor Julian in 363.

Two distinct groupings of Jews emerged in the Middle Ages that are still recognised today:

- (1) **ASHKENAZI JEWS** – these are Jews that resided in mainly Northern and Eastern Europe. This group were particularly devastated by the Holocaust. The name is derived from the biblical figure of Ashkenaz, the first son of Gomer, and a Japhetic patriarch in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10:3.
- (2) **SEPHARDIC JEWS** – these are the Jews that inhabited North Africa, Middle East, and Iberia (Spain and Portugal). For instance, some 300,000 Jews resided in Spain before the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century. Many of those were expelled by Spain and Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century. The name “Sephardic” is believed to be derived from a Hebrew word for Spanish or Hispanic. Some believe that it is referred to in Obadiah 1:20, “*And the captivity of this host of the children of Israel shall possess that of the Canaanites, even unto Zarephath; and the captivity of Jerusalem, which is in Sepharad, shall possess the cities of the south.*”

RISE OF THE SYNAGOGUES AND RABBIS

The Jewish Diaspora communities worshipped in synagogues throughout the Empire. The Apostle Paul preached in many of these in his three Missionary Journeys recorded in the Book of Acts (cf. Acts 9:20-22; 13:5, 14-52; 14:1-43; 16:13; 17:1-5, 10, 17; 18:4).

The synagogues emerged in the Babylonian exile because the Jews there had no temple to sacrifice in or pray in. Now, with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD, they played an increasingly significant role along with the rabbis at the expense of the temple priests. Oskar Skarsaune says,

“the synagogue originated as an answer to the needs of Jews who had no access to the temple. It is therefore no wonder that after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the synagogue emerged as the institution that could house a temple-less Judaism. It had done so for some time already...”

Two significant centres of Jewish spiritual life emerged at this time – Babylon and Yavneh in the Galilee region. They would play a leading role in the emergence of the written Talmud that would guide Judaism until today.

RISE OF THE TALMUD

The Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures and the Oral tradition (known as the “Oral Torah) of the Scribes and Pharisees governed Judaism at this time. The Scribes and Pharisees gave equal authority to this oral tradition (cf. Matt. 9:14; 15:1-9). They claimed that the oral tradition went all the way back to Moses who was given this as an exposition on the Scriptures. However, this evolving oral tradition was forbidden by the Torah to be added to Scripture,

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. (Deut. 4:2)

What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it. (Deut. 12:32)

Add thou not unto His words, lest He reprove thee, and thou be found a liar. (Prov. 30:6)

The Lord Jesus Christ explicitly rebuked this on a number of occasions. In Mark’s Gospel we read of one such rebuke,

He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with *their* lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, *as* the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. (Mark 7:6-9)

Christ went on to summarise the consequences of this, “*Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye.*” (Mark 7:13)

The Jews were forbidden to write down the oral law. After the Bar Kokhba revolt and the subsequent dispersion of the remaining Jews, a powerful leader known as Rabbi Judah the Prince (c135-217 AD) arose. According to the Talmud he was of the royal line of King David. He was said to be very wealthy and highly regarded even by the Romans. Rabbi Judah cited the Scriptures as supposed justification to break with the rule that the oral law cannot be written down,

It is time for thee, LORD, to work: for they have made void thy law. (Psa. 119:126)

In other words, he argued in this strained exegesis that because of the danger of losing the Jewish faith it was permissible to codify the oral tradition to preserve it. Along with a group of

other rabbis known as the *Tannaim*, Rabbi Judah eventually produced a written compilation of the oral tradition that is known as the Mishnah.

The problem was that the Mishnah raised more questions than it answered. The Jewish rabbis were deeply divided on many questions and interpretations. Hence the various sects in Apostolic times such as the two leading groups of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. These groupings were further sub-divided in bitterly opposed schools. The most famous of which were the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel. The Mishnah simply set out these divisions by recording the diverse schools of thought and argument. Hundreds of disputes between these two schools are set out in the Mishnah. A century later, other rabbis like the famous Rabbi Yehochanan added further writings to attempt to explain the Mishnah. These additional writings were known as the Gemara (meaning “Completion”). This Mishnah and Gemara together became known as *The Jerusalem Talmud*.

At the same time as the Gemara was compiled in Judea, the Babylonian Jewish schools compiled their own version of the Gemara. It was completed about A.D. 512 and became known as *The Babylonian Talmud*. It was the more complex and scholarly Babylonian Talmud that eventually came to dominate Jewish thinking. A Christian Jew, Dr Jacob Gartenhaus explains the difficulties of interpretation in the Talmud,

This Babel Talmud is veritably a Babel (mixture) of laws and customs, of facts and fiction, of science and superstitions. You may start out with a simple discussion of a certain law and soon find yourself in a fairy-land. It is hard to discern where reality ends and imagination begins: where begins the Halacha, the study of the law, and where ends the Agada (or Haggadah), the imaginative or homiletic portion. The language of the Talmud (mostly Aramaic), the style, the method, the sequence of things, in short, everything seems tangled, confused, chaotic, so that only years of instruction and practice and a “Jewish head” may make one understand it.

Over the centuries, the Jewish people have elevated the Talmud even over the OT Scriptures. They believe that it gives an infallible guide to interpreting the Bible. However, the diversity of views expressed within the Talmud has produced the same diversity and division within the Jewish people down the centuries. This leads to inevitable confusion and diminishing of the authority of the OT Scriptures. Gartenhaus explained,

In their great zeal for the preservation of the Holy Book, in their care that no harm befall it, the Rabbis have built around their beloved books, hedges and fences, and locked it with several keys, so that the Bible — especially the Spirit of it — has become inaccessible. The Talmud is an impenetrable wall encircling and concealing the Bible. So the wall without has become sacred while the Holy Scriptures within have become obscure, forgotten, a “sealed book.” Jesus said: “Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick,” so that it gives light to all around it. The Rabbis did just the reverse: they put the light of the Word of God under a bushel, probably to keep it safe there, forgetting that the purpose of light is not to be kept safe, but to shine and keep the people safe and enlightened.

The result of this lack of definitive authority in Judaism has been that it is even more fragmented today. Disagreement and division characterize modern Judaism. Despite the fact that there are

only about 14 million Jews, it is probably the most diverse religion on earth. There is no such thing as a monolithic school of Jewish thought. This is seen in politics in the Knesset as well as in the religious world, which has a wide spectrum of opinion. Many Jews like to humorously observe that if you have 4 Jews in a room, you will find at least 5 different opinions!

These traditions found in the fragmented sects of Judaism and the Talmud instead of leading them to salvation in Christ became substitutes for the reality of salvation. They don't lack sincerity but spiritual discernment. But their commitment and sincerity is not based in Biblical knowledge. The Christian Jewish, Apostle Paul bemoaned this reality in his day,

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. (Romans 10:1-4)

Bible commentators see this reality as part of the judicial blindness prophesied in Scriptures. Paul wrote of such to the Corinthians,

And not as Moses, which put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. (2 Cor. 3:13-15; cf. Rom. 11:7-10; Deut. 29:4-6; Jer. 5:21; Eze. 12:2)

So Paul explicitly states that the Jews have blindness over their minds towards the gospel. They read the OT Scriptures but do not recognise the application of the Messianic prophecies to Jesus Christ. However Paul held out the note of hope that this confusion and blindness will one day be lifted, "*Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away*" (2 Cor. 3:16; cf. Zech. 12:10). The hard hearts will be broken up by the power of the glorious gospel. A national repentance and revival will touch the Jewish people. The dry bones will live again. That is the reason why even today the Jews and the land of Israel is the focus of world attention again. God is not yet finished with His purposes for them.